

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Oysters d'Orléans

As my father always said, "He was a bold man that first ate an oyster!" I later found out it was Jonathan Swift who first made that quote, despite the fact that oyster consumption had been going strong back into prehistory. Today there's nothing better than a dozen or more of these salty raw bivalves, augmented with a spicy sauce of ketchup and horseradish. The BP oil spill has oyster lovers deeply concerned – and with good reason.

Oysters, best known for their reputed aphrodisiac powers, have been a favorite of gourmands throughout the centuries, including Roman emperors who paid for them by their weight in gold.

Oysters have always been associated with love. When Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, sprang forth from the sea on an oyster shell and gave birth to Eros, the word "aphrodisiac" was born. Fellow Greek god Momus let it be known that Aphrodite was talkative and sported creaky sandals. It got him kicked off Mount Olympus, but he was after all the god of mockery and satire. New Orleans took him in with open arms as the namesake of one of its wonderfully satirical Mardi Gras krewes.

The Oyster's reputation as a libido lifter is often disputed, although an American-Italian research team analyzed bivalves and found them to be rich in rare amino acids that trigger increased levels of sex hormones. Also, the high zinc content in oysters aids in the production of testosterone. Still, it may be that the oyster's erotic acclaim derives from its soft, moist texture and appearance. Dashing lover Casanova used to begin a meal by consuming twelve dozen oysters.

It was once believed that oysters were only safe to eat in months with the letter 'r' in their English (or French) names. This myth had a basis in truth back then since oysters were much more likely to spoil in the hot months of May, June, July and August (and good refrigeration was less prevalent).

Oysters were first served to the American public in 1763 when a primitive saloon was opened in New York City in a Broad Street cellar. In the nineteenth century, every sizable town in America had oyster saloons, oyster bars and oyster houses. In the Crescent City, the Acme Oyster House, Felix's and Casamento's all opened their doors in the early part of the twentieth century.

Antoine's Restaurant is the oldest restaurant in New Orleans still in operation. Established in 1840, it has created some spectacular oyster dishes like Oysters Rockefeller and Foch. But the oldest restaurant in continuous service in the United States is the Union Oyster House (then called Atwood and Bacon) in Boston, Massachusetts. Its doors have always been open to diners since 1826, and the building (previously home to a fancy dress goods business) has stood on Union Street as a major local landmark for more than 265 years.

It was at the Union Oyster Bar that Daniel Webster, a frequent diner at Boston's oldest restaurant, daily drank down each half-dozen oysters with a tall tumbler of brandy and water. He seldom had less than six plates.

The toothpick was first used in the United States at the Union Oyster House. Charles Forster promoted his newfound business by hiring Harvard boys to dine there and request the slender picks. In September 1936, future president John F. Kennedy enrolled as a freshman at Harvard. He loved to feast in privacy in the upstairs dining room at the Union. Perhaps oysters played a role in his love life.

In 1796, future French King Louis-Philippe (born October 6, 1773) lived in lodgings on the second floor of Boston's Union Oyster House. He had fled France to save his life when the government fell under the Reign of Terror. Exiled from his country and on the run, he soon discovered that his father had been guillotined. Louis-Philippe visited the United States for four years, staying in Philadelphia, New York City and Boston (where he earned his living by teaching French to many of Boston's fashionable young ladies). During his time in the United States, the future monarch met with American politicians and people of high society, including Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, George Clinton and George Washington.

It was in Boston that Louis-Philippe, Duc d'Orléans (great-great grandson of the prince for whom New Orleans was named), learned of the coup of *18 Fructidor* (September 4, 1797) and of the exile of his mother to Spain. He and his two brothers (Antoine Philippe d'Orléans, Duc de Montpensier, and Louis Charles d'Orléans, Comte de Beaujolais) then made a decision to return to Europe. They traveled to New Orleans, planning to sail to Havana and then on to Spain. This, however, was a dangerous journey, as Spain and Great Britain were

then at war. While in Louisiana in 1798, Louis-Philippe and his two brothers were entertained by Julien de Lallande Poydras in the town of Pointe Coupée.

The three brothers were also guests in 1798 at the New Orleans home of Bernard de Marigny's father (Bernard was thirteen at the time). Apparently the royal visitors were entertained in a grand fashion by the Marignys. One tale recounts that elaborate gold dinnerware was made especially for the occasion of the Duc d'Orléans' visit. It was tossed away into the Mississippi after the lavish event with the idea that no one would be worthy of ever using it again. Louis-Philippe (who later ruled France as King from 1830-1848 in what was known as the July Monarchy) was the last "King" to rule France. Napoléon III, who ruled as Emperor, would serve as France's last monarch.

Bernard de Marigny's father also made a substantial loan of money to Louis-Philippe, who was broke back in 1798. Thirty-two years later, when their houseguest ascended the throne, Bernard de Marigny was broke. The matter of the loan repayment was brought up, whereupon Louis-Philippe sent a complete set of dishes with his picture on each piece – but no *argent*. My, it's good to be the king!

In 1809, Louis-Philippe married Princess Marie Amalie, daughter of King Ferdinand I of the Two Sicilies and Maria Carolina of Austria. It is not known to what extent oysters played a part, but they had ten d'Orléans children:

Ferdinand-Philippe d'Orléans married Duchess Helen of Mecklenburg-Schwerin.

Louise d'Orléans wed King Leopold of the Belgians.

Marie d'Orléans became the wife of Duke Alexander of Württemberg.

Louis d'Orléans, Duc de Nemours married Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Kohary.

Françoise d'Orléans died young (1816–1818).

Clémentine d'Orléans wed August of Saxe-Coburg-Kohary.

François d'Orléans, Prince of Joinville won the hand of Francisca of Brazil.

Charles, Duc de Penthièvre also died young (1820–1828).

Henri d'Orléans, Duc d'Aumale married Princess Maria Carolina Augusta of Bourbon-Two Sicilies.

Antoine d'Orléans, Duc de Montpensier married Luisa Fernanda of Spain.

Louis-Philippe avoided the lavish spending of his predecessors. But, despite this outward appearance of frugality, his support came from the wealthy bourgeoisie. At first, he was much loved by the people and proclaimed "Citizen King", but his popularity suffered as his government was perceived as too monarchical. In time, the conditions and income of the working classes deteriorated until an 1847 economic crisis led to the 1848 Revolutions and Louis-Philippe's abdication.

Louis-Philippe, fearful of what happened to Louis XVI and his father, hurriedly left Paris in disguise. Riding in an ordinary cab under the name of "Mr. Smith", he escaped to England. The "King of the French" abdicated in favor of his nine-year-old grandson, but it never came to pass. On February 26 came the Second Republic. Prince Louis Napoléon Bonaparte was elected President on December 10 of the same year, and by 1852 he became Emperor Napoléon III.

French furniture styles are categorized by political epoch, and the "Louis-Philippe" period extends over the dates of his reign. But styles often change more gradually than governments – a style just can't abdicate. Furniture styles tended to linger in the provinces, where the latest Parisian fashions had less influence.

The king's middle-class manners may have influenced the simple elegance of the decorative style that bears his name. Graceful shaping with little ornamentation epitomizes the period. Simply rounded lines with balanced scale and key escutcheon hardware are its distinctive features. Darker woods such as mahogany, walnut and *palissandre* (aka wenge wood or African-Congolese rosewood, a dark and dense tropical timber that is durable and slow to rot) were utilized instead of the lighter varieties. Wood was often painted black, adorned with gilt with painted decoration, and sometimes veneered. Table and commode surfaces were frequently topped with marble.

Remember that a "commode" could be a toilet, but (for antique collectors) a "commode" is almost always a chest of drawers. In English, a "commode" is more precisely, one with a removable chamber pot – or a kind of bureau. The word comes from French, where the adjective "commode" means "convenient" or "agreeable", and the noun refers to a piece of furniture with drawers. A few centuries ago, the English also used the word to describe loose women (who were also, one would presume, "agreeable"). In short, a "commode" is a nice chest.

The ex-king and former tenant of the Union Oyster House and his family remained in exile in Claremont, Surrey, England, where the last King of France died on August 26, 1850. *Vive le Roi! Vive les huîtres!*

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